# Fired Central Coast biologist confronts Musk at Trump's address to Congress

BY CHLOE SHRAGER AND STEPHANIE ZAPPELLI

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, right, invited former U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist Ben Vizzachero to President Donald Trump's address to Congress on March 4.

Ben Vizzachero gritted his teeth on the floor of Congress on Tuesday night as he listened to President Donald Trump praise the budget cuts that cost the biologist his job at the Los Padres National Forest.

But he didn't make the trip to Washington, D.C., without getting to speak his mind — seizing an opportunity to confront Elon Musk and calling out the man he felt was most responsible for his firing.

Vizzachero, 30, was one of thousands of U.S. Forest Service employees fired over President's Day weekend at the direction of Trump and Musk's Department of Government Efficiency.

"This is a time for big dreams and bold action," Trump said during his joint Presidential Address to Congress on Tuesday, according to a transcript posted by the New York Times. "Upon taking office, I imposed an immediate freeze on all federal hiring, a freeze on all new federal regulations and a freeze on all foreign aid."

"We are draining the swamp. It's very simple, and the days of rule by unelected bureaucrats are over," Trump said, met by a cacophony of cheers.

Vizzachero attended the joint session of Congress as a guest of Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-19, weeks after he lost his job as a federal wildlife biologist on the Central Coast.

The biologist described the experience sitting among the minority Democrats as "very uncomfortable," watching as the Republican majority cheered and offered numerous standing ovations while the rest of the room remained seated, shaking their heads, "quiet and dejected."

For Vizzachero, the worst moment was when Trump touted firing federal employees.

"That was the most painful part of it all," he said, "... to hear a crowd full of people applauding and giving a standing ovation to this man as he bragged about destroying the jobs of me and thousands of other hard-working civil servants that love this country."

Vizzachero used the opportunity to advocate for federal workers — from meeting with lawmakers to calling out Musk after the speech.

Elon Musk attends President Donald Trump's address to a joint session of Congress at the Capitol in Washington, on March 4.

His goal was "to put a face to the name" of federal employees fired without cause, and to urge lawmakers to support public land and those who work there.

"I hope that when they cast those votes, they think of me and my friends who have been wronged by this administration in spite of our great love and respect and appreciation for this country's most cherished landmarks," he said. "We have a long way to go."

**Fired Central Coast federal employee confronts Elon Musk**

Vizzachero sat in the gallery about three rows in front of Musk — whom Trump praised for leading the budget cuts even though the billionaire is not an official employee of the government.

"Thank you, Elon," Trump said during the speech. "Thank you very much, we appreciate it. Everybody here — even this side appreciates it, I believe," gesturing to the Democratic cohort. "They just don't want to admit that."

After the speech, the biologist marched up to the tech tycoon and asked, "Mr. Musk, am I waste?"

"Who are you?" Musk asked.

Vizzachero answered that he was a wildlife biologist fired from the Los Padres National Forest.

"He had this smug grin on his face, and the red crowd sort of cheered him on," Vizzachero said. "He said, 'What exactly do you do here?'"

"I told him that I work to protect communities like the city of Monterey and the Big Sur coast from wildfire, and I work to keep America beautiful," Vizzachero said. "I told him, 'I love this country and I don't understand why you're destroying it. I've committed my life to saving and protecting these international landmarks.'"

The "red crowd" jeered at the biologist.

And Musk replied, "I don't think we need you here."

Then Vizzachero left, every bit as committed to protecting federal lands and their workers as he was when he arrived. He said the experience "was like fighting a dragon."

"My heart was pounding. My blood pressure was through the roof," he said. "I just knew that if I did not say something, I would regret it for the rest of my life."

When asked about Vizzachero's exchange with Musk, Panetta said he "was proud of him."

Panetta said Musk's work was "wreaking havoc on important government agencies that provide critical government services to the people of the 19th congressional district."

Vizzachero said he understands the frustration with the government and found bureaucratic processes as a federal employee slow and inefficient, he said.

"There are ways that it could be made efficient, and that's a message that I've sent to the Republican staffers," Vizzachero said, while adding that "Donald Trump is using an ax where we need to use a scalpel."

"We need to be very careful how re-evaluate the management of our lands," he added. "We should not be ignoring the experts and rapidly expelling generations of talented pro-

fessionals from our federal ranks."

According to the biologist, Musk doesn't understand the intrinsic value of nature.

Places like Big Sur, the San Rafael Wilderness and Cuesta Ridge "are special wild places, and they have a value that cannot be quantified economically to billionaires," Vizzachero said. "But all he cares about is the money."

"He was rude and arrogant and every bit as awful as he looks on TV, but he will never understand what he's destroying (in) this country, because he doesn't love it the way I do," the wildlife biologist said.

Wildlife biologist Ben Vizzachero conducts a waterbird count at Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge. He lost his job at the Los Padres National Forest as part of a wave of firings ordered by the Trump administration.

**Fired federal employees may be allowed to return to work**

With a Democratic minority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, legislation is not currently the most effective way to make change, Panetta said.

"We're relying on the courts, and unfortunately, Congress and the courts just don't move as fast as the executive branch, who filed 72 executive orders within the first month," Panetta said. "That being said, you're starting to see the courts act."

On Wednesday, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board ordered a 45-day stay on the terminations of U.S. Department of Agriculture employees fired during their probationary periods since Feb. 13, National Federation of Federal Employees representative Matt Brossard told The Tribune.

Probationary employees can be fired immediately for poor job performance, while other employees must be placed on a developmental opportunity plan with time to improve before losing their job, he said.

The issue is, most of the probationary employees were dismissed without a record of performance deficiencies, he said.

The U.S. Forest Service uses a so-called "pass or fail" system when evaluating employee performance, as employees can either receive an "unsuccessful" or "fully successful" rating on their review, Brossard said.

So far, all of the terminated employees he's spoken to earned "fully successful" scores on their evaluations — including Vizzachero.

As a result of this ruling, terminated probationary employees should receive back pay and be able to return to work for the next 45 days, Brossard said.

"I think it's a step in the right direction to right a wrong by this administration," he said.

He's not sure what will come next — but he noted that a lot can happen during 45 days, as numerous lawsuits are pending in the courts.

"The stakes are too high for us to get distracted," Panetta said in a statement after the speech.

"We will hold this administration accountable by ensuring that our nation's checks and balances are strong through legislation, litigation, investigation, communication and mobilization," Panetta told The Tribune.

"We will be fighting back, and fighting hard," he said.